



## OPINION

# Helping Kids Become Less Isolated and More Involved

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John Stanford recognized that it takes all of us to raise capable kids.

At Stanford's memorial service, two seventh graders, Jackie Lopez and Mutanda Kwesele, honored the superintendent with these words: "Superintendent Stanford, your dream is a rocket. Let's ride!"

We took those words to heart and Project Lift-Off was born.

We began by taking a demographic look at our families. We talked with parents and young people about what they would like to see in out-of-school programs. We interviewed program providers and key leaders to learn more about what programs and services are available in Seattle and we looked at what is succeeding in other cities.

There is no question that our society has changed dramatically in the past few decades, changed in ways that make caring for our children more challenging.

Foremost among these changes is that far fewer of Seattle's children have a parent waiting at home for them after school. In fact, more than two-thirds of Seattle's families have either the single parent or both parents working. We rely increasingly on a tenuous network of relatives, friends, televisions and formal care programs to engage, entertain, educate and occupy our young people between the school bell and the dinner bell and during the summer.

Research tells us that the first five years of life are crucial to brain development. Children grow through relationships with caring adults. To provide the important building blocks for success, we must have programs with well-trained, experienced caregivers who can foster early learning and development.

At age 9, only one out of 10 children is home alone, but by age 14 that number climbs to four out of 10. Young people tell us that they want more interesting programs and transportation to get to them, and studies tell us that children involved in meaningful activities do better in school.

We have a good foundation to build upon. From Kid's Place to the Families and Education Levy, we know that our citizens do step up to support children and families. We believe that we can make Seattle a place where every family that needs it can find affordable, high-quality care for their children and that our young people are engaged in safe, constructive activities that help them enter adulthood successfully.

We have done the research, and now we are going out to the community to seek ways to improve early care and programs for our children and youths when they are not in school. We are calling on parents, young people, teachers, businesses, labor, nonprofit agencies, faith communities, neighbors, community foundations and state and local government to come together to build with us new options and opportunities.

Starting this month, local Family Centers will host a series of community gatherings to collect responses to our findings (and yes, we are providing child care at these meetings):

- Southeast: Tomorrow, 6 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., Van Asselt Elementary School.
- Central: Thursday, 6 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., Gatzert Elementary School.
- Northeast: Saturday, 9 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., Meadowbrook Community Center.
- North: June 14, 6 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., Bitter Lake Community Center.

- Southwest: June 16, 6 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., Southwest Community Center.

Comments and recommendations from the community meetings, plus a series of youth forums and other events this summer, will be used in crafting a community action plan in the fall. Project Lift-Off has one goal: to improve care and opportunities for children from birth to age 18 for the times when they are not in school. That means more affordable, accessible and high-quality child care for our youngest children, varied out-of-school activities for those from elementary to high school and valuable work and community service experiences for high school students.

We invite all citizens to come together with us to seek ways to engage children in meaningful activities and build the interpersonal bonds that will help them realize their potential.

Every day we must ask ourselves what we can do to help children become more involved and less isolated. The answer cannot be "one size fits all," for each child is different and each family is different.

Seattle government is ready to unite with the community and bring new energy and effort to the task at hand but we realize that we can't do it alone. We will need the input, energy and support of citizens (those with and without families), children, businesses, nonprofits and child care providers.

Imagine what we can do together.